

Muslims Must Play Devil's Advocate

Many here have come to realise that critical thinking helps weed out wayward ideologies

by
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IN A speech delivered to delegates of the US Council on Foreign Relations earlier this year, former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong proposed that Muslims assume the lead in the ideological battle to win the hearts and minds of other Muslims against a wayward ideology promoted by extremists to destabilise global peace.

Singapore's position as one of South East Asia's most progressive nations means that Muslims here are in a good position to spearhead this cause.

Given that Muslims in Singapore can assume the lead in eradicating hazardous weapons of mass distraction, the need to cultivate a critical mind has therefore taken centre-stage among some members of the community.

How can Muslims here foster a culture that is conducive to critical thinking? An apt starting point would be to delve into Islam's rich intellectual tradition of support. History is replete with Muslim communities throwing up dissenting voices to challenge the status quo in the name of progress and universal human ethics.

In fact, the oft-touted Arabic term, *ikhtilaf* (differences in opinions), itself underscores the fact that self-interpretation based on an informed decision-making process is an accepted practice among Muslim scholars of the past. Historical evidence thus implies that Muslims have always been a critical lot.

The spirit of analytical debating persists till today in the contemporary Muslim world. International Islamic scholars such as Egypt's Hassan Hanafi, Europe's Tariq Ramadan and America's Khaled Abou el Fadl are examples of some voices vying to depart from a literal and ritual-centred interpretation of Islamic teachings towards the establishment of a value-based religion.

Closer to home, intellectuals like Malaysia's Chandra Muzaffar and Farish Noor, as well as Indonesia's Nurcholish Madjid and former president Abdurrahman Wahid, are social critics who have spoken against malpractices prevalent in their communities.

But challenges abound. The modern approach taken by some scholars have often been branded heretical by more conservative members of the community who are perhaps resistant to change.

Across the Causeway, for instance, differing representations of Islam by the elite in the recent election campaigns indicate the ideological tussle between the traditionalists and the

modernists. It shows how religion can be used as an ideological tool for promoting self-interest.

So while recent global developments necessitate that Muslims think analytically, prudence must be exercised to prevent producing a community of untrained critics. With the application of moderation in Islam, such extremism can be avoided.

For the institution of a peaceful brand of Islam to take form, intermediaries like the *asatizah* (religious teachers) and community leaders must lead by example to cultivate a culture where unorthodox views are not silenced, ridiculed, or brushed aside. The elite must willingly subject their views to intelligent criticism.

For the thinking Muslim man-on-the street seeking to defend his intellect against dubious “religious” ideologies, it is perhaps high time to manifest skepticism when dealing with ideas within and beyond Muslim concerns.

In multi-religious Singapore, the practice of critical thinking among Muslims could be improved. Many have come to realise that critical thinking is important as it helps weed out wayward ideologies.

In this respect, religious elders are seeking to build a community of progressive Muslims.

Avid followers of the mandatory Friday congregational prayers can attest that the message behind recent official sermons has been geared towards bringing about such a development.

In attempting to practice God-consciousness, Muslims here need to play the Devil’s advocate while engaging in intellectual discussion.

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